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on communicative abundance



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The system of modern communications media that has prevailed since the invention of the printing press – the Gutenberg galaxy – has been dominated by images of scarcity. This fact must be kept in mind when reconsidering the subject of public life, for time lags, transportation difficulties across geographic space and high production and distribution costs have constantly dogged the public circulation of opinions and information among individuals, groups and organizations. So, for example, in the dawning era of the struggle for liberty of the press – in 1776, the year of the revolution – newspapers, books and letters took eight weeks to travel from Philadelphia to London by packet-boat; the coach which brought news to London of the battle of Waterloo in eighteen hours was considered to have performed a miraculous journey; in the same year, the mail coach journey from London to Leeds regularly took thirty-three hours; and around the same time messages shipped from London to the penal colony of New South Wales took at least sixteen treacherous weeks to arrive.

Such technical restraints upon public expressions of opinion were compounded by the fact that power groups, above all early modern governments, states, and empires, regularly took political advantage of these technical restrictions to exercise sovereign power in arcane ways. Conforming to the principle *salus rei publicae suprema est lex*, sovereign power guided by natural law, divine right or the right of conquest tried to act like a God on earth, omniscient and invisible. Speedy decisions and the prevention of plots and conspiracies required power to have ten thousand eyes like

* This article was originally presented as the biennial Southam Lecture, Canadian Humanities Congress, Université d'Ottawa, 31 May 1998.

those of Argos; at the same time, sovereign power had to operate secretly, hidden away from the eyes of others, protected from the irrational passions of the commoners, the *vulgus*, of whom it was said that they should see and know nothing of the inner workings of government. Jacques-Benigne Bossuet, court preacher to Louis XIV and tutor to the Dauphin of France, was among the first to make this point clearly in his *Politique tirée des propres paroles de l'Écriture sainte*. 'Place any power outside, and you divide the state, ruin the public peace, and create two masters, contrary to this oracle of Scripture: "No man can serve two masters."'

The early modern argument for preserving and cultivating scarcity of information among others soon rebounded upon despotic government. Guizot's remark that the press should be utilized 'to seek after truth, and to tell it to power' expresses a central theme of the political thought and action of the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-centuries in the Atlantic region: the struggle to define and to protect, in defiance of scarcity of information, a public sphere within which public opinion concerning the public good could be elaborated. This struggle for public opinion and the public good implied the creation of a common, accessible space in which matters of public importance could be considered freely, openly. The public fight for public space wrapped itself in various metaphors. Some, distinguishing force and tyranny from public opinion, compared her to a gentle but divine Queen of the World (as did Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Lettre à M d'Alembert* [1762]). Others likened the public sphere to a court of law or tribunal, or as Jacques Necker put it, to 'an invisible power which, without treasures, without a bodyguard, and without an army gives laws to the city, to the court, and even to the palaces of kings.' Still others thought of the public sphere in terms of solar imagery (Starobinski), as an illuminated space in a world otherwise blanketed in darkness. In each case, the calls for liberty of the press and free public opinion nurtured the political ideal of enabling others

to witness the deconcealment of men of power and their arcane institutions – and so to replace scarcity with abundance. The freedom of men of learning to make public use of their own reason in all matters before the reading public (Kant) became a cherished revolutionary principle that required struggles for *mehr Licht*. Enlightenment: to lighten through reason, to illuminate and alleviate the world, to make it less dense and heavy, to open it up by enabling brightness to contest darkness, as when trees are felled and a free and open space is created in a forest.

The old utopia of casting light on power – pushing, for instance, towards ‘freedom of information’ and ‘government in the sunshine’ – understandably continues to motivate journalists, citizens, lawyers, judges, NGOs, and others. The advocates of *mehr Licht!* point to the lingering presence of zones of publicly unmonitored power. They ensure that criticism of administration by moonlight, corruption scandals, and objections to state secrets and cryptogovernment are nowadays commonplace in all of the old democracies, as demonstrated by the ‘classic’ recent public controversies generated by Watergate and the Lewinsky-Clinton saga in the United States, the Benegas affair in Spain, governmental corruption in Japan, the Rainbow Warrior bombing in New Zealand, the Piazza Fontana massacre and the Gladio affair in Italy, and the enforced resignation of the whole European Commission. Such uncoverings have a clear political implication: if, in a democracy power, should be subject to ongoing public scrutiny then more and better targeted media coverage is required to ensure that controversies about secret power are frequent and ongoing. In other words, that there are no zones within states and civil societies that are permanently enshrouded in dark silence.

The early modern political project of deconcealing power by dragging it from the shadows and flinging it into the blazing halogen of publicity today remains important, but arguably it is in need of drastic rethinking and revision. In no small measure this is because

we are living through times in which the old language of scarcity is being overtaken by images of abundance, cornucopias of communication, and even talk of information overload. This change of intellectual climate is overdetermined by a variety of cultural, organizational, and market-driven forces. Technical factors – such as electronic memory, tighter channel spacing, new frequency allocation, direct satellite broadcasting, digital tuning, and new compression techniques – certainly play their part. Chief among these is the invention and deployment of cable and satellite-linked, computerized communications, which effect both product and process innovations in virtually every field of media.

These media signal the emergence of a new galaxy of communication marked by the (potential) integration of text, sounds, and images, interacting in the same system from multiple user points, in chosen time (real or delayed) within a modularized and ultimately global network that is affordable and accessible. When Diane Keaton told her workaholic husband, in Woody Allen's *Play it Again, Sam*, that he should give his office the number of the pay phone they were passing in case they needed him, it was a big joke. But farce in 1973 is reality today. In the space of one hour, an individual at home can send a fax, be paged, send an e-mail, watch satellite/cable television, channel hop on radio, make a telephone call, read a newspaper, open the day's post, even find time for a few minutes' face-to-face conversation. In practice, few perform so many communicative acts in quick time, but still the aggregate figures indicate a high level (and cumulative growth) of personal involvement in the process of communicative abundance. Consider some examples, including the stupendous growth of the internet, which uses telephone lines to connect computers all over the world. In the early 1990s, around 100,000 computers were connected; by 1996, there were 12.8 million internet hosts, and by the year 2000 (analysts predict) there will be over 100 million users worldwide. Another example: the volume of international telephone calls climbed from 12.7 billion

call-minutes in 1982 to a staggering 67.5 billion in 1996, with a current annual growth rate of around 18–20 per cent. Similar growth patterns of media usage are evident within OECD countries. A BBC documentary series recently reported that the average Briton can expect in the course of his or her life outside of paid employment to fall in love twice, to have sex 2,580 times, to kiss for two weeks, sit on the toilet for six months, to spend three-and-a-half years eating, 12 years talking – and 12 years watching television. Such preoccupation with media are evident as well in Japan, where in 1992 the average weekly diet of television-watching per household was eight-and-a-quarter hours, up nearly half-an-hour from 1980. And the tendency for mediated acts of communication to grow, and to form the second largest category of action after work, and certainly to be the predominant household activity, is most strongly evident in the United States, the most media-saturated of the old democracies. According to the most recent research, the average American household has the TV set on for about seven hours a day, with actual viewing time estimated to be four-and-a-half hours daily per adult; radio listening averages two hours per day, most of it in the car; newspaper reading between 18 and 49 minutes daily; magazine browsing consumes between six and 30 minutes; and book-reading, including schoolwork-related texts, takes up around 18 minutes per day.

Such trends encourage talk of abundance, to the point where it can be said that abundance is the ideology of computer-linked electronic communications networks. This ideology is expressed in countless advertisements – Sharp's 'Information-Mobility-Power' campaign in support of its multimedia handheld personal computer is a case in point. Among the earliest intellectual versions of the same ideology was expressed in Ithiel de Sola Pool's *Technologies of Freedom*: 'There is nothing about spectrum technology that today mandates bureaucratic control of what is transmitted ...There need be no scarcity of capacity or access.'¹ John Perry

Barlow's *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* repeats the point that computer-linked networks 'are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth'.² Elsewhere, Barlow claims that the advent of cyberspace heralds nothing less than 'a new social space, global and antisovereign, within which anybody, anywhere can express to the rest of humanity whatever he or she believes without fear. There is in these new media', he writes, 'a foreshadowing of the intellectual and economic liberty that might undo all the authoritarian powers on earth.'

Caution should be exercised when pondering these claims, not least because the new age of developing communicative abundance is unstable, even self-contradictory. The time may well have come to bury the old clichés about scarcity (de Sola Pool), but that does not mean that communicative abundance brings harmony, freedom from conflict, unrestricted sending and receiving of messages – in a word, transparency. The development of an abundance of communications media not only fails to put an end to old controversies about the maldistribution of, and restricted access to, the means of communication. Just as the growth of material abundance fails to produce 'happy consciousness' (Marcuse), so communicative abundance contains new contradictions and produces public conflicts. Confusions, enigmas, disagreements about who gets what, when, and how actually multiply. The point may be put paradoxically: Communicative abundance prevents communicative abundance. The observation, analysis, and interpretation of this self-paralyzing tendency of communicative abundance has so far been badly neglected within the human sciences. It should now become an important priority of contemporary research in such

¹ Ithiel de Sola Pool, *Technologies of Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1983).

² John Perry Barlow, *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* (Cyber-Rights Electronic List, 8 February, 1996).

fields as communications, politics, philosophy, and sociological analysis.

The widening gaps between the communication rich and poor, who seem unneeded as communicators or consumers, is the most obvious source of contradiction. Abundance is of course a relational concept: abundance for some is scarcity or nothing for others. Consider the global divide between the communication rich and poor. Three-quarters of the world's population today cannot afford to buy books. The city of Tokyo, whose population is 23 million, has three times the number of working telephone lines than there are in the whole of the African continent, whose population is 580 million. Only one person in ten in the world has ever made a telephone call. A mere one per cent of the earth's population has access to the internet. The dualization of communicative options within countries such as the United States, Italy, Britain and the Netherlands is also evident. Probably a third of the population (many of them disproportionately older and less than fully employed) suffers from fear of switches, electrical devices, and keyboards – a pattern reinforced by the user unfriendliness of current hardware, software and operating instructions; by widening disparities of income and wealth; and by a corresponding 'utility gap', that is, the lack of perceived significant applications of communications technologies in certain zones areas of life, especially households. So, for example, a recent US study shows that computer availability ranges from 4.5 per cent of poor rural households to 66.4 per cent of rich suburban neighbourhoods; in England, although national telephone penetration varies significantly (from 89 per cent in the south-east to 75 per cent in the north), local variations are much higher (a Newcastle study showed some wards with 99 per cent penetration, others with as low as 60 per cent, and one housing estate in which 74 per cent of households lacked a telephone). Such statistics stimulate demands for public policies covering such matters as universal access to affordable (tele)com-

munications and improved design of hardware and software, which is to say that communication poverty is coming to be understood as *remediable*, not as the work of God, or chance, or a necessary condition of market forces.

High density communications media also generate ongoing conflicts over 'quantity versus quality'. That quantity does not equal quality is self-evident, but (for reasons argued in my *The Media and Democracy*³) it is difficult, probably impossible, to specify uncontroversial criteria of what is to be counted as 'better' or 'best' media or media coverage. Simple questions like 'Should children concentrate on books, rather than on watching television or playing videogames?' are hard to answer with certainty, except for platitudes about the need for balance and variety. The same holds true for discussions, say, about what counts as 'quality' television. Is it television led by producer-defined technical qualities, such as superior camerawork and lighting, intelligently written scripts, professional direction, or superb acting? Is it television that has stood the test of time? Is quality defined by public service or market-produced criteria, or is it simply in the eye of the beholder? Or is talk of quality even a meaningless hangover from the late-eighteenth century distinction between 'persons and things of quality' and 'the vulgar'? In practice, in market-based media economies, the wide and conflicting spectrum of available criteria for deciding what counts as quality pushes towards pluralist conclusions – towards a policy of 'letting hundreds of flowers bloom'. This has the paradoxical effect of encouraging audience segmentation, still further growths in the quantity of media possibilities and outputs, and yet more disputes about whether the effects are more or less pluralistic, more or less in 'the public interest'.

³ John Keane, *The Media and Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

Communicative abundance also desacralizes 'privacy'. Husserl's famous thesis that the 'world of everyday life' (*Lebenswelt*) comprises daily contacts that suppose unquestioned certainty about the world, free of disturbances, is obsolete. In the era of communicative abundance, no intimate topic is insulated against media coverage; the more 'private' it is, the more 'publicity' it seems to get. What might be called the Louis XVI model of publicity has returned, albeit in more democratic form. Once upon a time, the waking (*le levé*) as well as the going to bed (*le couché*) of his majesty were public events which it was a great honour to witness. Today, the private lives of celebrities – their romances, parties, health, quarrels, and divorces – are the interest and fantasy objects of millions of people. There is also (thanks to the talkshow) an endless procession of 'ordinary people' talking publicly about what privately turns them on, and off. And this is the age in which so-called reality-TV cuts from an afternoon children's programme to a man on a freeway setting his truck ablaze before turning his shotgun on himself, live, courtesy of a news helicopter.

The culture of communicative abundance, helped along by the star system, talkshows and reality-TV, destroys the early modern representation of property ownership, market conditions, household life, the emotions, and biological events like birth and death as 'natural'. It also weakens the older, originally Greek presumption that the public sphere of communicating citizens necessarily rests on the tight-lipped privacy (literally, the idiocy) of the *oikos*. Thanks to the growing communicative abundance, the realm of unmediated privacy disappears. But a backlash develops. To extend an eighteenth-century simile, communicative abundance – some argue – resembles not a goddess of liberty, but a succubus, a female demon supposed to rape sleeping men. Some even accuse high-pressure media coverage of killer instincts. Others, meanwhile, sensing that a private life is vital for cultivating a sound sense of self, make considered decisions *not* to get a mobile phone or use e-mail; there are

legal challenges to invasive junk mail; calls for the paparazzi to exercise moral self-restraint; and published legal codes of media conduct to dissuade journalists from unlimited digging and fishing expeditions. Meanwhile, a new generation of technologically sophisticated privacy activists has helped to develop public spheres on the internet, by means of low-cost e-mail alerts against consumer databases, expanded wiretapping capabilities, and against government initiatives to regulate access to strong cryptography; as well, there are campaigns favouring the development of privacy-enhancing technologies (PETs); and there are organized workers' complaints to their unions and employers about the personal problems, mainly communication stress, caused by e-mail gridlocks and communication overload.

These loud and publicly expressed complaints about the invasion of privacy are of long-term political significance. They indicate not only growing public awareness of the contingent and reversible character of the public-private distinction, which is to say that that distinction no longer has a divine, mysterious validity (as it did for most eighteenth-century observers), but is seen instead to be no more than a 'temporary resting place' (Rorty), and not a binary opposite set in stone. Communicative abundance also encourages individuals and groups to think more flexibly and contextually about the public and the private. They are forced to become aware that their 'private' judgements about matters of public importance can be distinguished from both actually existing and preferable, publicly shared norms. They learn to accept that there are times (eg, when confronted with mendacious politicians or men who are duplicitous about their sexual preference) when embarrassing publicity given to 'private' actions – 'outing', for instance – is entirely justified. And yet some also come to see that there are times when privacy – ensuring that certain matters are nobody else's business, that individuals and groups should not freely witness or comment upon their actions – is a precious inheritance, and

that nurturing a new category of public disputes about the merits of keeping 'private' certain areas of social and political life is therefore of vital importance.

High intensity communication produces another self-contradictory effect. Simply put, it stimulates the growth of new ideologies, among the most prominent of which is the reaction of nostalgic modernism, which fears the consequences of information overload and mourns the death of informed, rational debate. Nostalgic modernists say that we have left behind the world captured in Carl Spitzweg's painting *Der Bücherwurm* – the world of engrossed readers searching public libraries for publicly usable rational knowledge – and are now living in a world in which citizens and decision-makers alike are slowly transformed into pathetic parodies of the poor Biblical prophet Ezekiel, who at least had the honour of being instructed by God to eat papyrus scrolls – that is, to stuff himself with words – for a higher cause. Nostalgic modernism blames viewers', listeners', and readers' indigestion upon multimedia, the segmentation of audiences, low quality outputs, and it calls therefore upon governments and citizens to invent schemes for *reducing* information. In the United States, the most media-saturated democracy in the world, examples include 'TV Turnoff' initiatives, organized satirical attacks on the couch-potato, and Jerry Mander's well-known *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*.⁴ The trend is reinforced by intellectuals (Neil Postman, Herbert Schiller and others) who moan about 'the media' and voice their support for 'TV-free weeks'. Other commentators – Bill McKibben's *The Age of Missing Information* is exemplary⁵ – resort to neo-Romantic arguments to prove that the information 'explosion' blasts us out of the waters of our natural habitat, or ecosystem. So the age of communicative abundance is 'a moment of deep ignorance, when vital knowledge that humans have always possessed about who we are and where we live seems beyond our reach. An Unenlightenment. An age of missing information.'

The growth of nostalgic modernism reminds us that the development of communicative abundance unsettles and disorients – and humbles – intellectuals. Intellectuals – the modern architects, masters and manipulators of signs, the tamers and challengers of the art of crafting ordinary words into stories – first emerged during the sixteenth century. Despite continuous self-questioning of their own legitimacy, they tried to exploit their pretended superiority by skilfully manipulating words. Hegel's attack on public opinion in *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (1821) is exemplary of this arrogance. 'In public opinion truth and falsehood exist together', he wrote, 'it is the task of the great man to find the truth in it. For he is indeed the great man who tells his age what it wishes and means and carries it out.' Displaying attitudes of this kind, it is not surprising that intellectuals were often the inventors of grand stories, or ideologies – and that, consequently, they often succumbed to the perennial dangers of vanity, greed for power, and allying themselves with men of money and position. The well-known intellectuals who identified with Nazism, Stalinism, Maoism, and other political ideologies of the twentieth-century are only extreme variants of a more general modern trend in which intellectuals, fearing uselessness and isolation, but priding themselves on their mastery of storytelling, aspire to be prophets and heralds of reason, owners of truth. Their Faustian pacts with power proved self-destructive – look at the tattered public reputations today of figures as diverse as György Lukács, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Carl Schmitt – and no doubt the folly of arrogant, power-seeking intellectuals has done much to destroy the public reputation of the species of intellectuals as a whole.

But the contemporary growth of communicative abundance also

⁴ Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: Morrow, 1978).

⁵ Bill McKibben, *The Age of Missing Information* (New York: Random House, 1992).

contributes to the humbling of intellectuals. Gone are the days when they could suppose that media of communication serve continually to correct and refine and autonomously control their own utterances (as David Hume thought was the chief advantage of the printing press). Many master craftsmen of words sense correctly that they are no longer living in a world of king's courts and Party meetings and scarce, state-controlled media channels, that instead they inhabit a pluriverse of words and signs nurtured and sustained by a dynamic and complex plurality of communications systems, segmented audiences, and authorities. Only a very few intellectuals – like Umberto Eco, Salman Rushdie, Germaine Greer, Hans-Magnus Enzensberger, and Václav Havel – manage to become media literate and publicly famous, most often (interestingly enough) because of their penchant for heterodoxy, their dislike of despotism, their capacity for self-correction, their sense of responsibility for language. In the age of communicative abundance, in other words, virtually all intellectuals are forced to come to terms with their own powerlessness. Inclined to keep their distance from politics, disinclined to support ideologies, concerned mainly to excel as paid professionals, intellectuals become experts and academics withdrawn into secure and specialized fields of research. They tend to be treated (at best) as either garrulous professionals or (at worst) as wafflers, charlatans, or even loafers and parasites.

The latter stereotype is unfair, for more than most intellectuals sense the uncertainty and precariousness of our existence. Thanks to communicative abundance, intellectuals find that they must be humble, that there are many variously-sized public spheres – at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels – over which their authority is stretched thin. The days when intellectuals aspired to be legislators capable of dissolving human irrationality, warding off uncertainty and making sense of the fragmented utterances of the half-articulate public are slipping away. Just as private life is losing its sacred

status, so public life is today subject to desacralization. We are a very long way from the world of the French Revolution, whose leaders consecrated one of the *sansculottides*, the five days rounding out the republican year, to *Opinion*. The days are coming when a majority of intellectuals will understand and accept that we should refuse the monism inherent in the early modern talk of ‘the public’, ‘the public sphere’, ‘public opinion’, ‘the public interest’, and ‘the public good’; and that the old solar imagery of ‘the public sphere’ as a tribunal where truth is made transparent to all reasoning creatures – imagery that resurfaces in John Rawls’s claim, in *Political Liberalism*,⁶ that the Supreme Court is an exemplar of public reason – is obsolete. The days are coming when it is understood, instead, that among the tasks of the emerging new breed of democratically-inclined ‘public intellectuals’ – paradoxically – is the vigorous cultivation of a plurality of sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting definitions of public opinion and the public good within a variety of power-ridden contexts containing differently-sized public spheres – public spheres at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels – which serve in each case as the vital medium of non-violently naming the unnamed, highlighting different interests, defining and redefining the *summum bonum* and the *summum malum*, questioning unaccountable power, pointing out frauds, starting arguments, taking sides, shaking the world, thereby stopping it from falling asleep.

The dislocation and humbling of intellectuals, the main peddlers of ideology, directly weakens the grip of ideologies, including the highly influential rationalist ideal of ‘rational communication’. In the age of communicative abundance it is evident that those who chase perfect knowledge of the necessary structure of reality – the Big Picture – in order better to act on it are pursuing a will-o’-the-wisp. ‘In some remote corner of the universe,’ began Nietzsche in

⁶ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

one of his early essays, 'there was once a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the most arrogant and the most untruthful moment in "world history"'. Under conditions of communicative abundance, there are signs that the clever animals are becoming wiser, that they recognize that most acts of communication defy the dominant philosophical notion of rationality, derived from deductive logic, according to which there exists a set of formal reasoning procedures that express tacit inference rules concerning the truth or falsity of assertions independently of the content or context of utterances. Under these conditions, the attempt (for example) by John Rawls to seduce his readers into pleasureless orgies of formalistic reasoning is just plain reactionary. His insistence that in a democratic society citizens share in power as free equals, as reasonable and rational creatures who have a duty as a public to appeal to 'public reason' within the public forum, owes too much to Kant, and not enough to Hume. Today, there is growing public recognition of the huge variety of forms and modes of communication, a growing number of them (fax machines, video-recorders, photocopiers, mobile phones, the internet) being available cheaply to individuals; and growing public awareness that such communicative abundance multiplies the genres of legitimate publicly available programming, information and storytelling. Wittgenstein's counter-philosophical plea (in *Philosophische Untersuchungen*⁷) for recognizing the legitimacy of lay or 'ordinary reasoning' becomes a fact of life. Political oratory, preaching and quarrels (characterized by emotional intensity and a commitment to asserting one's point of view at all costs), hypertext, commercial speech, chatting and storytelling, in which points are built up in a haphazard manner by layering, recursion, and repetition: all of these jostle increasingly for public attention.

The myriad forms of reality expressed through these different genres of speech make it ever more difficult to conceive of the world as a *single* reality. The converse point also applies: communicative

abundance tends to destroy the metaphysical idea of 'reality' itself. The spreading 'culture of real virtuality' (Castells)⁸ contradicts the presumption that factual reality is stubborn, and that 'factual truth' is superior to power. 'Reality' is instead understood by many as the resultant of a multiplicity of competing interpretations whose production and circulation by the media lacks any coordinating centre. This trend is, for example, evident in the perception that within commercial speech 'real' has become not much more than a concept for selling things – like 'real' Coke, 'real' cheese', 'real' meat, and other commodities that are the 'real' thing. The 'unreality' of 'reality' theme is also evident in the heated public controversies generated by 'reality-TV' – an example is the trial and imprisonment of German documentary director Michael Born for making more than 30 'infotainment' exposés for Stern TV on such topics as neo-Nazis, child sweatshops and Ku Klux Klan reunions. The same trend towards the unmasking of 'reality' is evident in the logic of *exhaustion* inherent in the hitherto dominant medium of television, whose controllers, editors, programme makers and schedulers have a habit of treating themes to death, eventually boring their audiences and moving on to something different, without offering any final, 'true' conclusion. These various examples suggest that a combined effect of communicative plenty is to call into question the royal, solar and tribunal ('enlightenment') metaphors of the early modern period, that is, to weaken claims to a transparent society based upon rational communication of the truth. A common sense of contingency and disorientation spreads. Profusion also breeds confusion.

So what are the political implications of such blows against the belief in 'reality'? Exactly because of its propensity to destroy the

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967).

⁸ See Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1996).

fiction of transparent interaction, communicative abundance is arguably a potential friend of the democratic project. It is true that many philosophers and pundits are uneasy and that some, fearing the soiling of authenticity by mediated representation and the replacement of 'reason' with 'irrationalism', cling tenaciously to their belief in 'facts', 'data', 'rational argumentation', and 'Truth', certain (like Pierre Bourdieu in *Raisons d'agir*⁹) that in our society too many people think too fast and talk too much nonsense. Bourdieu and others are entitled to express such beliefs, as long as they respect the entitlements of others of different persuasion. For the emerging point is to change the world so that those who live in it become – like the self-ironising character named Ulrich in Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*¹⁰ – more capable of nurturing a sober sense of its great complexity, more aware of the corresponding need to tolerate diversity, and – unlike Musil's Ulrich, who takes a back seat in life, abjures action, and drifts with the tide – better able to cultivate the art of exercising judgements in public about the world. We live in times still plagued by smelly little orthodoxies and pompous ways of life hungry for power, most of them abreactions to disorientation. Further reflection on the subject of communicative abundance should teach us that the best political weapon against such orthodoxies and arrogant ideologies, including the ideology of communicative abundance, is to cultivate the sense that we know that we do not know what is to be done, that life requires decisions and decisions require judgements, and that the publicly learned capacity to choose courses of action in a variety of differently-sized public spheres riddled with complexity is the democratic art *par excellence*.

It is true that communicative abundance does not somehow automatically ensure the triumph of this democratic art. Communicative abundance has several other effects, some of

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Raisons d'Agir* (Paris, 1996).

which are unhelpful or mildly harmful in a democracy, while others are perversely undemocratic. The pelting of audiences with a hail of political advertisements – as in the 1998 California gubernatorial campaign, when prime-time television viewers got up to 30 spots by outsider Al Checchi in three hours – can and does produce frosty apolitical responses, like leaving the living room, changing channels, or muting, and concluding with a heavy sigh that the less you know, the better off you are. Communicative abundance also arguably produces definite increases in levels of citizens' inattention (Schudson):¹¹ while they are supposed and expected to pay attention to affairs outside their immediate household and neighbourhood, and while through time their spatial horizons of understanding are definitely stretched by communicative abundance, citizens find it ever harder to pay attention to the media's vast outpourings.

Then there are the more perverse effects of communicative abundance, such as its promotion of a culture of flippant amorality. In the information-saturated democracies, the process of message-sending is subject to what can be called the Rule of Indeterminacy. All mediated opinions are flung into a swirling cyclotron of high-density messages, and this implies that even the most powerful individuals' expressed opinions perforce have a contingent meaning and contingent effects. The price to be paid for a media message is not just money and influence: it is acceptance of the fact that the world of mediated communication is syntactically lax, multisemantic, full of overlapping, sometimes colliding messages, whose meaning is always in the last instance subjectively determined by the interpreters or receivers of messages. To the extent that the Rule of Indeterminacy governs the world of mediated communication it encourages individuals sys-

¹⁰ Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1967).

tematically to float cynically upon the swirling tides and waves and eddies of fashion – to change their minds, to speak and act flippantly, to embrace or even celebrate opposites, to repeat the frivolous words of the British novelist and journalist A.N.Wilson when confessing that he writes an article one day and realizes the next, ‘Oh shit, I think the precise opposite. It’s slightly pompous to care though, isn’t it?’

False pride (Augustine’s term) of this kind may encourage individuals and groups to sink into themselves and carelessly to snub the judgements of others, in which case the Rule of Indeterminacy nurtures an amoral cynicism that has highly corrosive effects within democratic regimes. Yet the point is worth repeating: there is no necessary outcome of this kind. For there are strong indications that communicative abundance, understood as a trend that can be acted upon politically, helps to nudge the world into accepting that it is complex and diverse, and that therefore the cultivated art of making public judgements about matters important to publics of different size is not only politically important, but also for individual actors *qua* individuals an existential imperative. Communicative abundance prods individuals into taking greater responsibility for how and when they communicate. The days when children were compulsorily bathed and scrubbed behind the ears, sat down in their dressing gowns prior to going to bed, and required to listen to British Broadcasting Corporation radio are over. So too are the days when millions found the radio and film performances of fascism fascinating. Today, individuals are forced to recognize that if they were constantly required to involve themselves fully in the multiple outputs of the media, then they would quickly go mad, or else be swept away in the vast and semi-structured tide of events we call life.

¹¹ See Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (London: Routledge, 1993).